



A Comparative Study of Mystical-Visual Expression of Nizami Stories in Two Paintings of Haft Peykar and the Death of Shirin by Emphasizing the Relationship between Visual Structure and Story Context

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Abstract. Nizami is one of the most famous poets of the sixth century. His mystical and romantic stories are full of wisdom. His two stories called ‘Haft Peykar’ and ‘Khosrow and Shirin’, which are discussed in this article, have interested artists throughout the history of Iranian art. The painter of the ‘Haft Peykar’ painting shows the whole story from beginning to end in one single image. The painter of the ‘Death of Shirin’ painting, emphasizes the paradoxes of life, the confrontation of life and death, heaven and earth, and loyalty and betrayal in the composition, colors and symbolic elements. This study used an analytical-descriptive method. The purpose of this research was to determine how the painters used these two mystical literary texts to express their own ideas. What can be seen from the two paintings is that the artists used the stories of Nizami to create their works with an artistic and mystical visual language, using symbolism in the composition and the colors. It should be noted that the painters also added meanings to their paintings and thus presented new content for the viewer.

Keywords: *Haft Peykar; illustration; Iran; Junaïd; Khosrow; mystical; Nizami; painting; Shirin; visual expression.*

1 Introduction

The art of Iranian painting, along with the mystical, epic and moralistic literature of Iran, has developed its visual expression in a tradition that is nearly 400 years old. The artists that illustrate these texts are able to apply a very broad range of concepts, for example mystical themes related to the belief that there is hidden meaning in life, or that each human being can be united with God.

This tradition started during the Timurid era and has produced precious works by great masters such as Jonaïd and Kamal al-Din Behzad. These painters from the school of Tabriz managed to reach perfection, with Sultan Muhammad as the most revered among them, the greatest master of the era.

Two mystical works of Nizami show the path to felicity. In the story 'Haft Peykar', Nizami describes a tremendous mystical experience. A person called Bahram, a man who wants to conquer the world and thus is a typical example of someone who craves for worldly power, is guided by seven princesses from the seven major climes (world regions) of that time. At the end of the story he leaves the world to find bliss.

A similar theme is present in the story of Khosrow and Shirin, especially in the scene of Shirin's death. In this story, Khosrow praises Shirin, a very beautiful woman and a symbol of chastity and courage, which are the two principles of salvation in Iranian Islamic culture. Particularly, her extraordinary death is highly commended.

These two important mystical works were illustrated by Persian painters at a time when art was at its peak in its ability to express such meanings. Therefore, in this paper, by examining both texts, we try to answer the following question: How do Persian paintings portray mystical texts with visual means?

This study was conducted using a descriptive-analytical method. This is one of the most popular research methods today. In a descriptive study, the researcher emphasizes the description of events. The more precise, objective, complete and intelligible the description, the more relevant it is. In an analytical study, on the other hand, the events are analyzed. An explanation of the causes and an interpretation of the effects are discussed.

The descriptive-analytical method lies at the interface between descriptive and analytic research, where the researcher first gives a scientific description of something and then describes the causes and gives an interpretation and an explanation. Thus it responds to why and how questions and gives a more complete understanding of the historical process.

In this paper, by analyzing the visual structure (composition, color and illumination) of two paintings, it is specified how hidden mystical meanings and themes in the stories they portray come forward in the visual structure of the paintings in a symbolic way.

2 'Haft Peykar' Painting

2.1 The Story of 'Haft Peykar'

'Haft Peykar' or 'Haft Gonbad' or 'Bahramname' are different titles for the fourth book of the Masnavi of Nezami about Bahram Gur. Bahram was the fifteenth king of the Sassanian empire, whose rule lasted from 420 to 438 AD.

The story 'Haft Peykar' is a combination of both epic and lyrical aspects, i.e. the section on Haft Gonbad has a lyrical and romantic spirit. The historical section, although the poet attempts to present an epic portrayal of Bahram, is a fusion of epic and lyrical elements.

Nizami describes the life of Bahram from his ascension to the throne and then speaks about his marriage to seven princesses from seven climes, assigning a color to each. Each day Haft Gonbad visits a dome as a guest of each of the women. Each princess then tells a story and Nizami quotes from these stories that are masterpieces of Persian poetry [1].

Then the poet speaks about distress in the kingdom due to the king's negligence of the realm and the attack of the Chinese king on Iran. Finally, Bahram becomes aware and following a onager, he enters a cave and disappears.

As Moeen has stated [2], 'Haft Peykar' is composed in such a way that Haft Peykar appears at the beginning and the end of story, while the middle section is dedicated to the story of the princesses. Still, Haft Peykar was chosen as the title for the whole story.

Haft Peykar is one of the few works from the classical Persian literature written in a language that is symbolic and mythic and has a psychological approach to analyzing and questioning, and so far, as Anzabi Nejad has stated [3], few attempts have been made to unpack the "trick of it".

According to Hamidian, Haftgonbad's palace with its sparkle and color and changing sun angle is described fully, including the color of Bahram's garments and the colors of the domes that have a symbolic meaning (each color represents one day of the week, one of the seven climes), playing with light and shadow, and so on. It shows that Nizami, more than any other poet in our literature, was successful in bringing poetry and visual art together [4].

In the story of Haft Peykar, Bahram is the symbol of the perfect man, during the different stages of his life, when he leaves the physical world to reach the spiritual realm and when he finally merges into the eternal God.

If the seven domes with seven colors are symbols of our earthly world, Bahram first passes through each one starting with the black dome, which is a symbol of various things, and ending with the white dome, which is a symbol of light and clarity.

In this regard Moeen argues that "Nizami knows about the influence of the number 'seven' in various nations and especially its use in the legends, so he

put the foundation of this legend on the number 'seven' according to the seven planets and because of the story of love and its manifestation that is 'woman', it should be noted that he illustrated seven princesses." [5].

According to Cooper, in the Islamic view, the number seven is a perfect number and refers to the seven heavens, the seven skies, the seven lands and the seven seas, seven colors, seven active forces, the seven stages of the heart, going around the Kaaba seven times, and the seven signs of God [6]. The number seven is also important in Sufism. The seeker on his spiritual journey goes through the seven valleys: the quest for love, insight, self-sufficiency, unification, perplexity and annihilation to reach truth and perfection.

Nizami uses this association to send Bahram on a journey to the spiritual world. As Ghazizadeh writes, Bahram represents the seeker who passes through the seven valleys with the help of the seven princesses from every clime. From a spiritual point of view, the seven climes represent the living world through which the spiritual world can be reached [7].

Each princess is a manifestation of God's beauty and they open the doors of the divine mysteries for Bahram, and explain the teachings of the Tao to him with their stories. Each princess has a domed pavillion in the palace with its own special color, which together symbolize the eternal dome, all of them reflecting a stage of demeanor.

According to Symon, "in Haft Peykar the earth and the sky and their beauty are combined with each other. Hence, Haftgonbad is built on the ground in seven days and with seven colors and seven brides while on the other hand it resembles the heavenly world and wants to be elevated to it. 'Woman' has a close relationship with the earth Goddess" [8]. Cooper also states that "Seven, is the number of the Great Mother" [6].

So it is natural that the princesses from the seven climes teach their wisdom to Bahram in Haftgonbad in seven days. By courting these women, like conquering cities and fortifications, Bahram becomes the owner of the whole world.

The separate mystical symbolisms of the colors in Haftgonbad should be briefly pointed out: the black dome is the symbol of silence in the world and the beginning of creation; black is the symbol of the world that is waiting for its appearance, hence it also relates to the first day of the week, which is Saturday. The yellow dome symbolizes the emergence of the light of the sun and also the beginning of life, related to the advent of the day and the sunrise, to which Sunday is related. The green dome has the color of life and freshness and is

related to the moon. Old beliefs tell us that green is the color of the moon and its day of the week is Monday. The red dome has the color of love and affection and fire. Its heat contrasts with cold and it is related to the planet Mars and its day of the week is Tuesday. The blue dome has the color of the sky, lighted by the sun and is the symbol of water and happiness and harmony, an inner journey without turmoil. It is represented by the planet Mercury and Wednesday. The brown dome refers to the color of the soil to which we return after earthly life. It refers to the planet Jupiter and Thursday. The white dome is the color of purity, which is the symbol of reaching the spirit world and is related to the planet Venus and Friday. At the end of the story, Bahram leaves his worldly concerns to find the truth of creation, which is actually his beloved God.

2.2 Junaid Life and Works

The oldest document that mentions the painter Junaid is the introduction of Doost Mohammad Heravi in Bahram Mirza's *Moragha*, where Junaid is introduced as a student of the eighth century and early ninth century painter Shamseddin Shirazi. He was a native of Shiraz, born between 1382 and 1410 AD, and was active in book layout workshops in Baghdad.

At the beginning of the Mongol invasion, followed by the destruction of many major cities, Shiraz, due to its policy, was safe from invasion and plunder. Because of this secure position, many artists and scientists moved to Shiraz. Hence, in this region many scientific and artistic centers were created. The famous Jalāyer school of painting, developed under the Jalayery rulers, was established in Shiraz. The Jalāyer school paid especial attention to lyrical and mystical subjects. The most famous book from this school is the 'Khajoo Kermani' poem by Divan. This Persian poet was the greatest gnostic of Hijra in the eighth century.

The version we discuss here is dated 799 AH, illustrated in 9 scenes and was calligraphied by Mir Ali Tabrizi and painted by Junaid in Baghdad. In all probability, most of the images of *Khajoo Kermani* were painted under Junaid's supervision.

According to Behnam, "Junaid Baghdadi was seen as the greatest painter of his time. Some of his works are even signed. From before and even after this period, until the 10th century AD, no painting with the artist's signature has been found. As far as we know, one of the images of *Khajoo Kermani* is the oldest work that was signed by a Persian painter." [9]

Eight other works of Sultan Ahmed Jalayer Divan from 808 AH exist. According to Bayani, these outline images resemble the common Tasheer in the

Safavid period in which gold and blue dominated the color palette. Unlike in other books, the paintings in this manuscript were put in the margins instead of the text [10].

Junaid's method is based on a complete and accurate design as is visible in the manuscript of Sultan Ahmad. Pakpaz says: "A wide image space, small figures in the areas of nature or architecture, tiny and tall figures with stature and gentle movements, various colors, and spaces decorated in a masterful way are the characteristics of Junaid's works." [12]

2.3 Analysis of the 'Haft Peykar' Picture

Compared to other paintings portraying the Haft Peykar story, the work of Jonaïd is externally and internally different (Figure 1). This is the only image that has the stories of Bahram and Haft Peykar together in one image. Junaid illustrated the poet's mystical manifestations in a specific way. When we look at the first image, we can immediately understand the theme. He used composition and motifs to express the subject and used natural colors to express the theme. In other paintings only Haftgonbad's palace, Bahram and his wife, and the domes in special colors are shown to tell the story. This work, however, contains visual and mystical art work depicting the whole story of Haft Peykar.

Here it should also be noted how careful the artist worked, because as mentioned in the story, the Khovarnaq palace had seven figures painted on the walls under the border of the domes and the palace even has a circular and cylindrical form. The symbol of the circle in Islamic civilization has metaphysical and spiritual meanings, so putting this cylindric building on a rectangular frame represents heaven on earth. The palace is designed as if the sun is shining from outside and the moon casts its light on passersby outside. To show this opposition, the artist shows the outside sky with a dark blue color for the night, while the windows of the palace show daylight (Figure 2). Nizami also mentions the decorations of the palace wall. The painter used intricate images and geometric motifs on the walls of the palace and Lachak, and many illuminated frameworks decorate the palace in an artful manner (Figure 3).

We can divide the image into three parts: the upper, middle and lower part. We will review and analyze each part separately (see Figure 4). It is essential to point out the synchronization of the different stages of the story in one scene by the artist. According to the poem, images of the seven beauties are on the walls of the palace Khovarnaq as a belt under the dome, and the image of a young man smiling and looking up at these women is shown, with the name Bahram written over his head.



Figure 1 Haft Paykar, attributed to Junaid, Anthology of Iskandar Sultan, Shiraz, eighth century AD (National Archaeology Museum, Lisbon, Portugal).

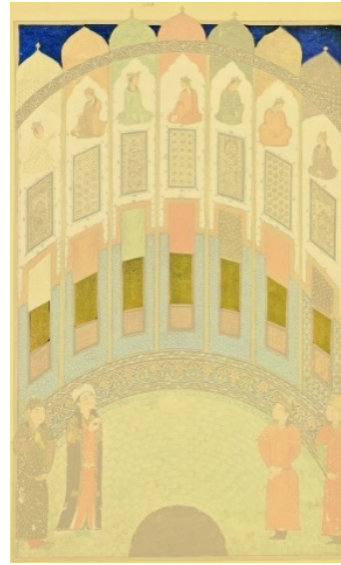


Figure 2 The night sky in contrast with the daylight of in the windows.

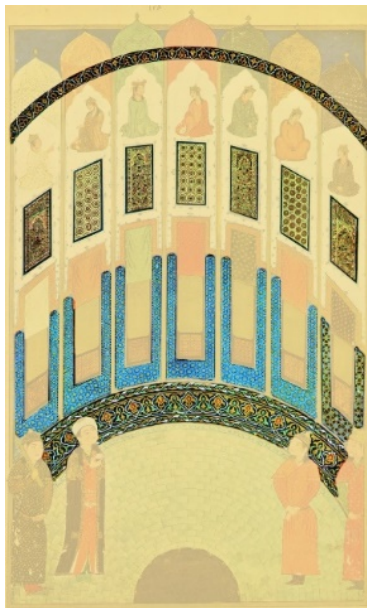


Figure 3 The use of decorations on the building.

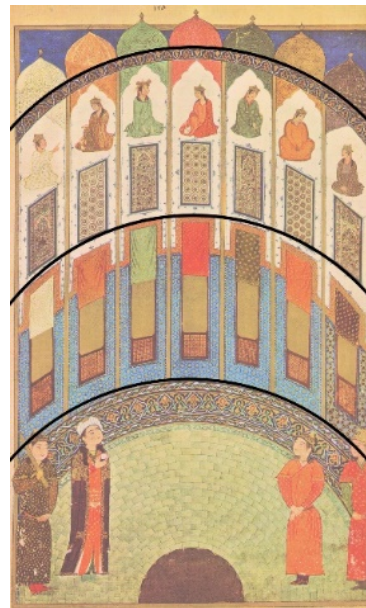


Figure 4 The three parts of the image.

Here (see Figure 5), the artist rather than showing an image of Bahram on the wall, painted him present at the scene while watching the figures of the princesses on the wall.

The artist represented Bahram's love for the princesses with a red dress, while their chastity and purity is represented by a green dress. In order to simultaneously tell Haftgonbad's story and that of the princesses from the seven climes and Bahram's paying attention to them, rather than painting a colorful Haftgonbad on top of the seven columns, the artist shows the princesses in a special manner that shows that they are talking to each other and are telling a story to Bahram with Bahram eagerly listening. Thus he discovers the wisdom of this world by hearing their stories and understanding the finiteness of this world. Bahram is in a princely state in the lower part of the painting with his Minister Shideh and some attendants. According to the story of Haft Peykar, Bahram is a symbol of worldly power and wants to conquer all known lands. In the view of a mystical painter, such a materialistic human being should be placed in the lower part of the image. Another element, which is not mentioned in the story, is the pool water. Water in all religions has a sacred meaning. By putting a round pool in the image, the artist wants to convey a mystical meaning.



Figure 5 The bottom part.

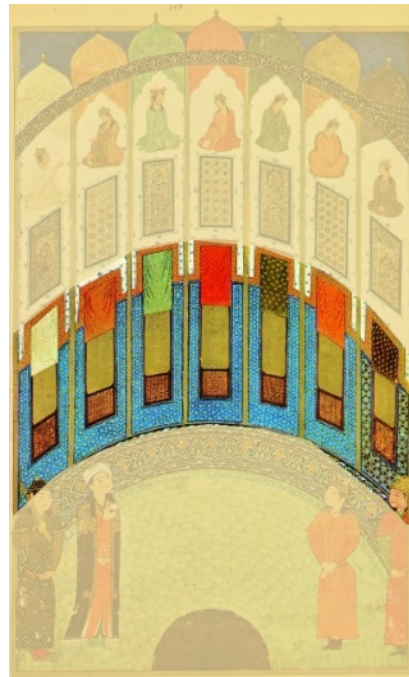


Figure 6 The middle part.

Water is a symbol of unending and eternal life. The reason for building Haftgonbad's palace is mentioned in the story. After serving the country and bringing justice everywhere, Bahram was told by his courtiers that they wished him to remain protected against any accidents in the world and to always be happy and successful. So Shideh proposed to build Haftgonbad a palace. If the building should be made in special way so that each dome refers to a color, to a day of the week and a planets, and there are also seven princesses from the seven climes, each in their special dome, Bahram will be protected against any accident. Thus, the water pool in this painting is a symbol of his eternal life.

Another point that should be noted about the lower part of the painting is the presence of 18 green tiles or brick rows under Bahram's feet. Green is the color of life, and eighteen rows are associated with the Abjad number of 'al-Hay' [living], i.e. the name of God, which means 'having no death or destruction at all'. The type, placement and design of the bricks show Bahram the depth of the well from which he can escape by the grace and help of God. Generally speaking, the third part of the image represents the position of Bahram between earth and heaven. With the help of God he tries to be delivered from this neglected well, which is the first stage of the seven valleys of insight and is called 'Talab' [seeking].

In the middle part of the image (Figure 6), there are the princesses from the seven climes, where the colors of the curtains and of the domes are the same as the colors of the princesses' clothes. In the story there is no writing on the curtain in the doorway, but the artist did add this. The curtains says 'covering' and the curtains being halfway up allowing the light to come inside indicates that part of the truth has been revealed to Bahram, uncovering the beauty and glory of God. Using curtains can also be an indication of something else. In a theater, they are used to change scenes. This represents Bahram's conduct behind the curtain. The gold makes it look like there is a lot of light shining into the palace from outside. Gold is the highest expression of color. In mysticism, color is an expression of God's actions in this world. Indeed, through each window shines the light of God, and each woman is one of the manifestations of His light.

Around the doors are tile decorations, as if the Lord himself adorned this entrance hall for special consideration to Bahram. The artist consciously made a tiled doorway that is still distinctive in the dark in order to show the way for Bahram to reach spiritual insight.

In the upper part (Figure 7), which is the main part of the story, a supernatural meaning is revealed. After Bahram passes through the golden port and goes behind the curtains, the face of a beloved appears, which is a manifestation of

God. In this poem and many other old stories, woman is a director and is a means to bring man to the right and elevated position. Indeed, woman is the manifestation of truth and beauty.

The placement of the domes and the altar point at mystical meanings. Passing through the golden door, reaching the bright white floor is another indication that women symbolize perfection. Domes in Islamic architecture have a deep meaning. The square groundplan of the mosque transitions to the circular shape of the dome that reaches up in the sky. As the circular form peaks, it becomes more concentrated (Figure 8).

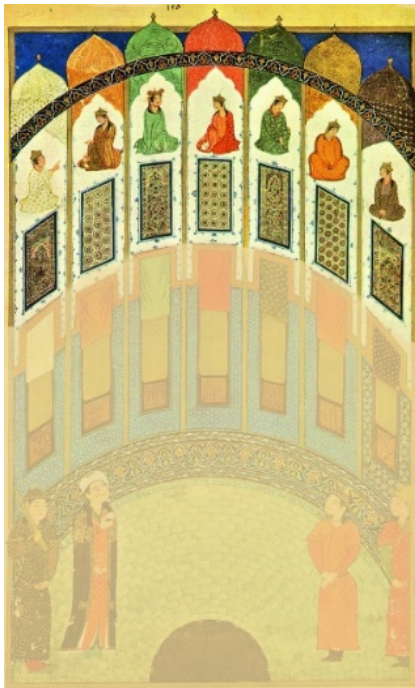


Figure 7 The upper part.

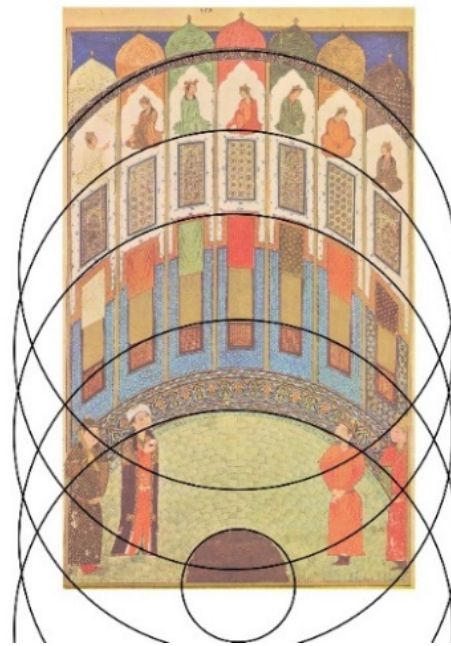


Figure 8 The circular division.

3 'The Death of Shirin' Image

3.1 Reviewing the story of 'Khosrow and Shirin'

The Khosrow and Shyrin poems form the first episode of *Khamseh* of Nizami Ganjavi, which have a lyrical theme. They describe the rule of the Iranian king Khosrow. He was in love with a princess from the Armenian kingdom, Shirin, and married her after some adventures. Shirin was a virtuous woman.

Shirooyi, who was a son of Khosrow from another wife, killed his father out of greed and wanted to marry the beautiful Shirin. In spite of her loyalty to Khosrow and knowing about the betrayal of Shirooyi and the murder of her husband, she accepts his marriage proposal, provided that she be allowed to give away all her property to whomever she wishes, and Shirooyi agrees. Shyrin goes to the soldiers and the people and gives away all her treasures and property so nothing is left for Shirooyi, and also tells the people about Shirooyi's treachery. She sets up a wedding party and dances and puts on a red wedding dress. Shirooyi thinks she is happy about the death of Khosrow and that Shirin fell in love with him. Shyrin allows Shirooyi to say goodbye to the body of Khosrow before their marriage, but she kills herself by sticking a dagger into her side, exactly where Khosrow was wounded, and drapes her body over the body of Khosrow.

The poet, in a beautiful expression, says that since Khosrow's blood had dried up, Shyrin puts fresh blood on Khosrow's body by killing herself. This can be seen as a reminder of the blood-brother tradition that has prevailed among young men for the purpose of fulfilling a promise to the end of their lives, and is a symbol of Shirin keeping her vows to Khosrow and also her purity in this incident so she can proudly look forward to the day of judgment by God.

Nizami points at Shirin's death as well as her earthly life and gives her the title of martyr. In the end, they were both buried in the same room and the people and soldiers who knew about the treachery of Shirooyi came to the palace and killed him.

3.2 Analysis of the 'Khosrow and Shirin' Image

The painter used some elements from the story, such as the spread of the hair of the men and the women, the presence of people at the mourning ceremony, Shirin's makeup and her red dress for the wedding, and the focus of the scene is Shirin's suicide and putting her body on the body of Khosrow. Other elements and spaces in the image were added by the painter (Figure 9). In general, the composition of this work is symmetrical. If a line is drawn through the middle of the image, the left and right sides of the image are almost completely symmetrical in the architecture and the arrangement of the people. Even the birds in the sky are almost identical on either side of the axis. The symmetrical composition of this work is emphasized so much that even the colors of red, ultramarine, gold and white are symmetrically spread. Here it should be noted that this mystical story emphasizes the unity of the body and the soul of Shirin and Khosrow. Symmetry means that two things are totally in accordance with each other. In this work, it is used to express the unity of two people and the concept of unity in general.



Figure 9 Death of Shirin, unknown artist, *khamseh* of Nizami manuscript, Tabriz, tenth century AD (Metropolitan Museum of Arts, USA).

By drawing vertical and horizontal lines as well as circular ratios in the work, it can be seen that his work is completely based on geometry and symmetry to achieve a balanced composition. The main part is placed in the middle of an octagon (Figure 10), a square and a circle (Figure 11) in the center of the building. The intersection of the perpendicular line and the horizon of the composition is precisely at the position of Shirin's dagger. The intersection of the circle and the square represents the interaction between heaven and earth.

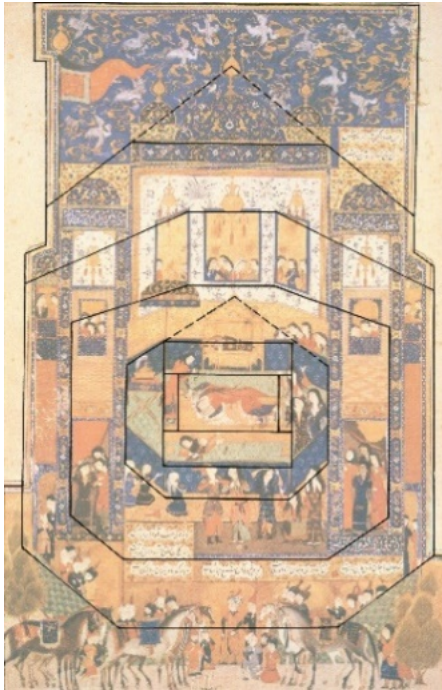


Figure 10 Octagonal division.



Figure 11 Circular division.

In the center, which depicts the room where the bodies of Khosrow and Shirin are located, it can be seen that his crown, a symbol of Khosrow's worldly power, is placed on his throne (Figure 12). The Qur'an is placed above the head of Khosrow. Some names, such as Allah, Muhammad and Ali, appear on the red flag to emphasize the Shi'ism of the artist. The red color of Shirin's dress is a symbol of joy and wedding, but the underwear is ultramarine, which is a symbol of mourning. This contrast between the red and ultramarine can be seen in the whole painting, from the architecture to the clothing of the people. Even two curtains on both sides of the building are also red and ultramarine, all of which emphasizes the fact that the artist pointed to Shirin's wedding and the mourning of Khosrow, and perhaps in general, it is an expression of Shirin's mourning for her husband while in appearance she has to show joy.

Both Nizami and the painter point to the issue of the life and death of Shirin. If we draw the lines of the main room differently (Figure 13), we encounter another octagonal shape. The octagon in architecture refers to the entrance of a building, where a person enters but is still not completely inside. This is similar to the grace that lies between this world and the other afterlife.

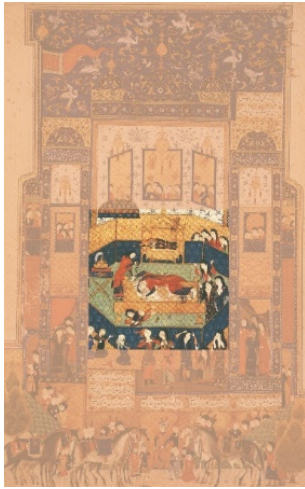


Figure 12 The king's room.



Figure 13 The octagonal room.

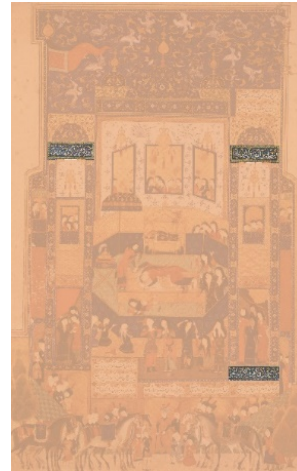


Figure 14 The four divine sayings.

The sky is ultramarine while the clouds are gold, causing it to be no ordinary sky but instead showing the spiritual world. The birds fly in the heavens and often move in the direction of the clock, which is a symbol of the progression of life. But what life is shown when the story is about Shirin's death? The artist emphasizes Shirin's eternal life, which she has earned as a martyr, which makes her immortal. This is emphasized in the poem and used in the painting, as in the way the last sentence is portrayed, which describes the sweet death of Shirin.

The building has five domes, where largest of them is placed in the middle and four smaller ones are located on either side. In the two inscriptions of the building there are four divine sayings, i.e. *Sobhan Allah*, *Al-Hamdullah*, *La Elaha Ela-al-Allah* and *Allah Akbar*, as well as *La Howla va La Ghovata Ela Le-Allah* (لا حول و لا قوة الا بالله) in the lower inscription, emphasizing the sacredness of purity and divine satisfaction. This is also emphasized in the poetry used in the image (Figure 14).

Five candlesticks are shown in the building, which are a symbol of light and clarity. The windows are open in the building and a golden light is visible in contrast with the night sky, with which the painter symbolically shows life and death. The people who are outside the palace, at the bottom of the work, do not grieve and seem to have come for the wedding. Inside the palace, however, the people are mourning.

In general, the painter in this work deliberately emphasizes paradoxes of life, the confrontation of life and death, wedding and mourning, happiness and sorrow, heaven and earth, and ultimately loyalty and betrayal. Hence, the

painter in this work shows these contrasts using the composition, color and symbolic elements.

4 Conclusion

What can be seen from these two paintings is that the artists used the text of Nizami's story to create their works but with a certain artistic and mystical language with composition and colors that have symbolic meanings. It should be noted that the painters also added their own meanings to the story.

In the Haft Peykar image, different moments and places and causes and effects, such as the king's love for the seven princesses and marrying them and them telling stories to Bahram and also his reaching perfection and immortality, appear in one image at the same time. In fact, the artist produced a complete and beautiful concept from the story, so the audience can get the whole story by observing the painting.

In the Khosrow and Shirin image, the painter deliberately emphasizes the paradoxes of life, the confrontation between life and death, wedding and mourning, happiness and sorrow, heaven and earth, and ultimately loyalty and betrayal using composition, color and symbolic elements. Both painters break up time and space, providing a wide perspective to the viewer. This can only be achieved through Islamic painting, because unlike in the western pictorial tradition, time and space are broken up so that an abstract universe can be depicted.

This study showed that mystical meanings appear through both composition and color, and the artists were able to use these two important visual elements to reveal the hidden meanings of these stories.

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